

From social services to human services – a look back
by Victoria Carpenter, Human Services Department Director

On my first day at work with Charlotte County Social Services back in Dec. 1987, I was ushered to my corner office. I so happy to have a window, but horrified at the back wall—it was covered from floor to ceiling in stick-on bright orange vinyl! Although I am still in that same corner office today, thankfully the orange wall is gone.

What else has changed? One of my first tasks was to prepare the grant budgets for our senior services programs. The process included arranging twelve handwritten spreadsheets on a conference table and using an adding machine to calculate our projected budget expenses. It would be some time before we got our first computer and loaded our budgets into the Lotus 1-2-3 program, and even longer before staff used desktop computers for their daily activities. Another one of my initial tasks was to coordinate the layoff of county staff performing homemaker services for our frail elderly clientele. These grant-funded homemaker services have been successfully sub-contracted to local home health agencies since January 1988 saving thousands of county dollars over the years.

Throughout the 1990s we operated as the social/senior services department, having combined these two departments and staff for cost savings and efficiencies. In the year 2000, housing services and transit services joined the department and the human services department took a new name and mission to herald in the 21st century. In 2003 the office of veteran services was transferred to the human services department. In 2005, and after Hurricane Charley in 2004, the state authorized Charlotte County and the human services department to operate the nationally recognized “211 Information and Referral” call center for residents in need. In 2006, the county authorized the human services department to open and manage the family services center, a one-stop center hosting non-profit agencies that provide services to families and children. In 2010, further cost savings and efficiencies in operations were achieved by combining the staff and functions of the family services center and social services in a combined family services division.

Today, the human services department continues to serve and identify the strengths and needs of residents, especially the most vulnerable, and coordinates the appropriate resources so they may function efficiently in all areas of their lives. The department includes several divisions: family services helps individuals, youth and families develop self-sufficiency goals to build strong families, financial independence and healthy communities; veteran services provides veterans and their families with information and access to programs and services available through veterans affairs; transit services provides public and transportation disadvantaged transit services through the Dial-a-Ride and Sunshine Ride programs; senior services provides case management and coordinated in-home care to the frail elderly; and housing services, which serves as the county’s housing liaison with the state and federal governments to rebuild neighborhoods and assist low and moderate income families with access to affordable and safe housing.

Although technological advances and efficiencies have been effective tools improving our abilities to deliver our programs and services over the years, personal and compassionate assistance is still the human services department’s goal. Some things do not change, even twenty-four years later. For more information on services, please visit www.CharlotteCountyFL.com/HumanServices.